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Dear Amy,

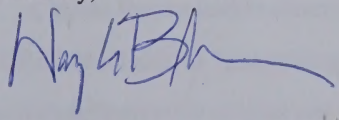
Here's a draft of the story I wrote for *World.* That issue went to press this Monday, so it should reach you by early next week. I apologize for the delay in getting from our interview to publication.

My editors and I negotiated our way through some changes by telephone last week. After those talks, while I was attending a conference in Washington, my editors rewrote the story's lead without my input.

Throughout the long process of getting this into print, I worked to keep the story even-handed.

Don't hesitate to call if you'd like to talk about the story, whether in this draft form or as it appears in *World*, and I'll be glad to meet with you again at Poor Richard's.

Sincerely,



Tightly-wound Springs

Conservative evangelicals and their critics find little common ground

Dick Noyes of The Chinook Bookstore felt no alarm when he first heard about Focus on the Family moving from suburban Los Angeles to Colorado Springs.

More than a year after Focus arrived, Noyes is worried. In November, 53 percent of Colorado voters approved Amendment 2, which overturned laws in Aspen, Boulder and Denver forbidding discrimination based on sexual orientation. In Colorado Springs, 66 percent of voters approved of Amendment 2.

The Pikes Peak Library District changed its mind about stocking Madonna's explicit book, *Sex*—basing its decision on an advance copy on loan from Focus. As he has in past decades, Noyes detected a renewed surge of what he considers intolerance.

"The thing that bothers me about Focus is its agenda," Noyes said, including its call for Christians to be active in politics.

"It seems to me a person who becomes an evangelical has taken a giant leap of faith," Noyes said. "A true believer would find it difficult to accept other kinds of viewpoints."

Colorado Springs residents who disagree with conservative evangelicals—critics including liberal Catholics, mainline Protestants, political liberals, non-Christians, and homosexuals—have banded together as Citizens Project, a group founded last year by attorney Doug Triggs and his wife, Amy Divine.

Citizens Project leaders claim that even some evangelicals belong to the group, which defines its mission as "maintaining the traditional American values of separation of church and state, freedom of religion and speech, pluralism, individuality, and tolerance and compassion for others."

The group officially opposed Amendment 2, and has voiced concerns about other political activity by what it calls "local sectarian and political extremists." Citizens Project

counts more than 5,000 people on its mailing list, and has attracted more than 800 people to its frequent meetings.

Focus and Citizens Project are the city's two most visible agencies in what often feels like the front line of America's culture war, but Citizens Project is not strictly an anti-Focus group.

In its newsletter, *Freedom Watch*, Citizens Project publishes frequent news about and critiques of the Christian Coalition, Citizens for Excellence in Education, pro-life candidates, and Colorado For Family Values, which championed Amendment 2.

Leaders of Focus and Citizens Project have held some private meetings in an effort to defuse some of the city's tensions.

A week before Easter, Focus President James Dobson joined 17 other religious leaders and church members in signing a bland Covenant of Mutual Respect. The signers published the Covenant as a full-page ad in the local daily newspaper, the *Gazette Telegraph.*

"The diversity of our religious perspectives may lead us into areas of possible disagreement," the covenant said in the understated tone of a committee memorandum. "It is our hope to address those areas of difference with an attitude of openness, respect and love, and a willingness to listen and learn from each other, to the end that we may manifest the ministry of reconciliation."

The Covenant ended on an enthusiastic note: "We believe that in so doing we reflect the nature of our God—the Creator of the universe and Lord of all!"

In addition to Dobson, other signers included Roman Catholic Bishop Richard C. Hanifen; the Rev. A. Bernhard Kuiper of Village Seven Presbyterian Church; Terry Taylor, director of U.S. ministries for The Navigators; Rabbi Howard Hirsch of Temple Shalom; and the Rev. James W. White, pastor of First Congregational United Church of Christ.

White recently wrote a less conciliatory essay for *Freedom Watch*: "I too nervously observe the religious right's entry into the public domain. My strongest reaction, though, is to something else: these folks' theological underpinning. Though some will resist that naming, all are *fundamentalists*" (White's emphasis).

"Protestant fundamentalism is less than 100 years old....Historically, then, fundamentalism is a recent aberration from 'great tradition' Christianity. Luther, Aquinas, Anselm, Augustine and Paul would find it appalling," White claimed. "Personally, I take the Bible much too seriously to take it literally. My read on the Bible is that we are called to be attentive to its 'weightier matters': love, justice, and mercy."

For its part, Citizens Project is concerned about the right's references to battling for children's hearts and minds. "The religious right literature we read here at Citizens Project repeatedly invokes this war imagery, expressing intolerance of any differing worldviews and calling for 'battlefield tactics' in today's war between right and wrong," said a *Freedom Watch* essay. "The spiritual warfare theme is that of Christian righteousness (exemplified by the stand of religious right groups on particular issues) opposed and beleaguered by the myriad of Satan's forces who must be defeated yet again for God's will to triumph."

Two-way harassment

Both sides have experienced harassment. Focus headquarters has been the target of vandalism and bomb threats. Richard Skorman, a Citizens Project board member, has received threatening phone calls and vandalism at his pizza restaurant because of his opposition to Amendment 2.

A viciously satirical poster pasted on a downtown mailbox renames Focus as "F---ing in the Family." The poster imagines Focus President James Dobson speaking on these topics: "What your wife really means when she says 'no' in bed," "sex with daughters," and "fighting Planned Parenthood's attack on traditional family patriarchy." A sketch on the poster changes the Focus logo into a combination cross and phallus.

An art exhibit at Skorman's restaurant "in protest of Amendment 2" calls itself "Out of Focus." A flier for the show assures artists: "You may remain anonymous if you fear retaliation from those who consider themselves more focused than the rest of us!" Skorman said the show's organizer chose the show's name, and that he regrets her choice.

Skorman and Amy Divine, who are both Jewish, express a desire for peaceful co-existence with conservative evangelicals. Both told *World* their concern is ensuring that liberal voices are not drowned out when city officials discuss homosexual rights, sex education, and school curricula.

Many teachers have been scared, Ms. Divine said, since homosexuals and self-identified pagans were ejected from a diversity panel scheduled in a local public school.

"If the religious right was allowed to have full reign of selecting curriculum, it would be very restrictive," Skorman said. "What we would like to make sure happens is that the other viewpoint also is expressed."

"There is an expectation that our goal is to get these (conservative Christian) groups, which it isn't; or to make them look bad, which it isn't," Ms. Divine said.

She sees Citizens Project as promoting the sort of diversity that includes not only out-of-the-closet homosexuals, but openly evangelical Christians. "The difficulty is how to be inclusive when worldviews are in such conflict that one worldview would in essence destroy the other worldview."

She recognizes the inherent conflict between evangelicals who believe in absolute morality and people who believe in relative morality. "I get the sense from some politically active evangelicals that if I don't believe what they believe, then I don't believe anything," she said.

She is not reassured by references to Judeo-Christian values. "I don't like the term. I don't think most Jews like it. It's not a term Jews use. It's a term Christians use."

Skorman and Ms. Divine believe Amendment 2 unleashed fear—not only among homosexuals, but throughout the broader community.

"There's an atmosphere and a feeling, whether it's real or perceived, that gays and lesbians are not welcome in this community," Skorman said. "There's a new image of Colorado Springs—that we're only conservative evangelicals, that we're all gay-haters."

If the image is not challenged, Skorman said, "it's likely to be a self-fulfilling prophecy."

Everybody's suffering

"One of my impressions is how under attack *everybody* feels," Ms. Divine said. "Evangelicals feel they're under attack, that it's not OK to be a Christian."

Ms. Divine agreed that some mass-media reports on the city have been alarmist. She said some network producers have called her to ask if any book-burnings have occurred yet.

"I don't want to be backed into a we-them position," she said. "It's in the media's interest to create that kind of portrayal. It helps sell magazines."

It also has led to some alarmist descriptions of the city.

Newsweek, for instance, claimed "Colorado Springs has six evangelical radio stations, whereas much larger Denver has only two." Of the 23 radio stations in Colorado Springs, five cater to evangelicals. Denver has six radio stations with Christian programming.

Newsweek also ate crow after describing Will Perkins as a lifelong Presbyterian (he converted at 30) and a founder of Colorado for Family Values (he is its chairman of the board and spokesman).

Similarly, *The Denver Post* reported that "Focus on Your Own Damn Family" bumper stickers "decorate many vehicles in this town." Those bumper stickers are far outnumbered by the friendlier "Celebrate Diversity" stickers distributed by Citizens Project.

Church & State focused more on attacking Dobson than describing Colorado Springs. In his article "Out of Focus," reporter Rob Boston described the evangelical Pulpit Rock Church as "fundamentalist," and called Operation Rescue leader Randall Terry a "militant anti-abortion zealot." He wrote that the "far-right youth training program called Summit

Youth Ministries" is based "just north of Colorado Springs." Summit may be right of center, but it is southwest of the Springs.

Citizens Project strives to substantiate its reports in *Freedom Watch*, rather than simply rehashing rumors. Citizens Project once heard, for instance, that people calling themselves Focus employees were harassing businesses perceived as liberal or pro-homosexual. The group called Focus, which clarified that the ministry would not allow such harassment by its employees. *The Los Angeles Times* reprinted the rumor without including any comments from Focus.

"Citizens Project has been doing all we can to dispel rumors," Skorman said. "We've sometimes been accused of being on Focus's payroll."

"We could use the money, but we're not," Ms. Divine said, laughing.

Trained canaries?

Some materials distributed by Citizens Project assume a more combative style.

Focus recently invited some Citizens Project representatives to attend a Focus-sponsored Community Impact Seminar. Citizens Project board member David Bruce deconstructed the seminar in two papers, one called "Hocus Focus."

Bruce interpreted criticism of condom distribution in public schools as Focus claiming that "condom distribution is actually a plot to infect children."

"Their initial strategy appears to be to convince the majority of Americans who 'claim' to be Christians but do not yet accept the absolute truth of Jesus Christ to abandon tolerance and join Focus," Bruce wrote.

"Do we really want to allow Focus to usher in another Dark Ages?"

Bruce, while writing that he tried to be "an objective and dispassionate reporter," referred to conservative evangelical activists as "intellectually handicapped," "tolerance-impaired," and "trained canaries."

"A report like that makes us not want to take them (Citizens Project) seriously," said a weary Tom Minnery, Focus's Vice President of Public Policy.

"I don't know why evangelicals are criticized for wanting to get involved in public life. They are citizens too. They have as much of a right to involvement as people on the left," Minnery said.

"As evangelicals step into the public square, they need to speak in a language people can understand," Minnery said. But then evangelicals are accused of being stealth candidates. "You're criticized if you do (quote Scripture) and you're criticized if you don't."

Minnery believes the ultimate message of such double-barreled criticism is that some people simply do not want evangelicals involved in politics.

"We're happy to respond to legitimate issues and to fair criticism, but what we see is suspicion and ignorance about us," Minnery said.

"We're a very big fish in a very small bowl here," said John Eldredge, Director of Seminars and Research in the Focus Public Policy Division. "In Los Angeles we operated with a fair amount of anonymity, and we preferred it that way."

"We have tried to pursue a cordial relationship with Citizens Project, and thus far we have benefited from their willingness to squelch rumors that they know to be false," Eldredge said.

Minnery and Eldredge point out that Public Policy consumes only 5 percent of the Focus budget. Focus spends far more money answering people's questions about family life, and producing books, magazines, and films to promote family life.

They also said Focus is more geared to national and international ministry than to determining who wins seats on the Colorado Springs city council or area school boards.

Skorman and Ms. Divine said they have no argument with conservative evangelicals running for public office, but they want candidates to be candid about their philosophies.

"They have every right to be involved in local politics," Skorman said. "What's difficult about this whole situation is that a certain viewpoint can be represented disproportionately."

At All Souls Unitarian Church, the Rev. Harvey Joyner said he encourages his parishioners to listen to conservative evangelicals and to build bridges.

"So often Unitarians are reactive to the sociopolitical or religious atmosphere in the surrounding community," he said. "We get a lot of that here, where people feel they need to jettison any respect for Christianity because of what they have experienced in the name of Christ. So much of my work is getting people unstuck so they can get on with their lives."

Joyner has seen membership increase from 176 to 326 since arriving at All Souls in 1989. "I do believe people who were in a religious sleep have been reawakened by the arrival of Focus on the Family, Colorado for Family Values, and the Christian Coalition."

—DOUG LEBLANC *in Colorado Springs*